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Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

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USIA-06 SS-15 NSC-05 /065 W
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R 061100Z DEC 74
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8913

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 19138

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, TH
SUBJECT: THAI CONFRONTATION POLITICS: ENTER THE MONKS

REF: A) BANGKOK 18965
B) FBIS D030534Z DEC 74

BEGIN SUMMARY: THE FARMERS RALLY OF 18-30 NOVEMBER 1974 REPRESENTS THE FIRST TIME, TO OUR KNOWLEDGE, THAT BUDDHIST MONKS HAVE TAKEN AN ACTIVE ROLE IN A POLITICAL EVENT IN RECENT THAI HISTORY. SEVERAL WATS HAVE EXPELLED BUT APPARENTLY NOT DEFROCKED SOME OF THE MONKS WHO PARTICIPATED. THIS ACTION, IN TURN, SPARKED YET ANOTHER PROTEST RALLY LED BY RAMKAMHENG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS, SOME FARMERS, AND OTHER INDIVIDUALS WHO WANT THE MONKS REINSTATED. KHUKRIT PRAMOT HAS EXPRESSED SUPPORT FOR THE EXPELLED MONKS. GENERAL KRIT SIWARA ON THE OTHER HAND REPORTEDLY BELIEVES THAT THE MONKS' ACTION WAS "THE END OF EVERYTHING ... THERE IS NOTHING MORE SERIOUS THAN THIS." WHILE THE LATTER PROTEST RALLY HAS FIZZLED OUT, WE BELIEVE THAT MONKS' PARTICIPATION IN DEMONSTRATIONS OVER IMPORTANT SOCIAL ISSUES MAY BE HERE TO STAY. END SUMMARY.

I. THE CHRONOLOGY

1. THE FIRST ACTIVE POLITICAL MOVE BY MONKS IN RECENT THAI HISTORY OCCURRED ON 23 NOVEMBER 1974 WHEN PHRA PHONG
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CHIRAPHUNYO FROM CHIANYAI DISTRICT OF NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

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PROVINCE SPOKE FOR ONE HOUR BEFORE THE RALLYING FARMERS. THE BANGKOK POST REPORTED ON NOVEMBER 24 THAT PHRA PHONG HAD SAID, AMONG OTHER THINGS, "FARMERS MUST HAVE THEIR LANDS BACK TO EARN A LIVING AND THIS COULD BE DONE BY RULING THE COUNTRY UNDER THE SOCIALIST SYSTEM." HE ALSO DREW ATTENTION TO THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR. (COMMENT: PHRA PHONG RECENTLY ANNOUNCED HIS INTENTION TO LEAVE THE MONKHOOD AFTER 28 YEARS AND ENTER POLITICS. HE WILL RUN IN CHIANYAI DISTRICT FOR THE SOCIALIST PARTY OF THAILAND. END COMMENT.)

2. TWO OFFICIALS FROM THE RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT ON NOVEMBER 25 TRIED TO EXPLAIN TO 12 PARTICIPATING MONKS THAT THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN THE RALLY WAS AGAINST BUDDHIST DISCIPLINE. THE BANGKOK POST REPORTS THAT DEMONSTRATING FARMERS NEARLY LYNCHED THE TWO OFFICIALS BUT POLICE STEPPED IN TO SAVE THEM. THE MONKS CLAIMED THAT THEY COULD NOT LEAVE THE RALLY BECAUSE THEIR OWN PARENTS WERE FARMERS AND THEY HAD TO HELP. WACHARA IAMCHOT, DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT, LATER EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT THE MONKS MIGHT BECOME POLITICIZED AS HAVE THEIR COUNTER-PARTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM.

3. THE MOST DRAMATIC POLITICAL ACT BY THE MONKS OCCURRED WHEN 20 OF THEM ACTUALLY CLOSED ARMS AND LED THE FARMERS, THEIR STUDENT AND LABOR SUPPORTERS, AND OTHER "DEMONSTRATORS", TO GOVERNMENT HOUSE ON NOVEMBER 29. THEY WAITED THERE WITH THE FARMERS UNTIL THE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED AT 2:30 AM NOVEMBER 30 THE NINE POINT AGREEMENT (REF A) WHEREBY THE GOVERNMENT PROMISED TO MEET NEARLY ALL THE FARMERS DEMANDS.

II. THE CONTROVERSY

4. THE FARMERS' RALLY HAS THUS GIVEN BIRTH TO A NEW CONTROVERSY OVER THE RECTITUDE OF THE MONKS' ACTIONS. KHUKRIT PRAMOT DEFENDS THE ROLE OF THE MONKS CLAIMING THEY CAME WITH GOOD INTENTIONS AND THAT THEIR PRESENCE CONTRIBUTED TO NON-VIOLENCE. ON THE OTHER HAND, GENERAL KRIT SIWARA REPORTEDLY FEELS THAT THE MONKS LEADERSHIP ROLE IN THIS CONFIDENTIAL

"POLITICAL RALLY" WAS "THE END OF EVERYTHING ... THERE IS NOTHING MORE SERIOUS THAN THIS." (REF B).

5. THE BUDDHIST ECCLESISTICAL COUNCIL IMMEDIATELY UNDERTOOK AN INVESTIGATION OF THE MONKS INVOLVED, AND DECIDED ON DECEMBER 3 TO STAND FIRM ON ITS ORIGINAL BAN AGAINST PARTICIPATION BY MONKS IN ANY POLITICAL EVENTS, RALLIES, OR DEMONSTRATIONS. THE COUNCIL HAS AUTHORIZED THE CHIEF

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ABBOTS IN THE DIFFERENT TEMPLES TO DETERMINE THE PENALTIES FOR OFFENDING MONKS INVOLVED, BUT APPARENTLY WITHOUT DEFROCKING THEM.

6. ONE OF THE MOST OUTSPOKEN OF THE EXPELLED MONKS, MAHA CHAT KONGSUK OF WAT DUSITTARAM, THONBURI, WAS ABLE TO RALLY AN ESTIMATED 200-300 LOCAL RESIDENTS IN HIS SUPPORT DECEMBER 1. MAHA CHAT CLAIMS THAT THE ABBOT OF THE WAT ORDERED OTHER MONKS TO VOTE AGAINST HIM AND EXPEL HIM FROM THE WAT. SUBSEQUENT REPORTS INDICATE, HOWEVER, THAT MAHA CHAT WAS ONLY VISITING THE WAT AND THEREFORE HIS EXPULSION IS NOT THE SAME AS THE DEFROCKING IMPLICIT IN EXPULSION FROM ONE'S HOME TEMPLE. ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS, MAHA CHAT PLEDGED TO CONTINUE HIS FIGHT AGAINST ALLEGED INJUSTICE AND INTENDS TO CALL ON RANKING MONKS FOR SUPPORT CONTENDING THAT HE ONLY JOINED THE PROTEST "TO CONSOLE THE FARMERS". HE MAY CALL A MEETING OF JUNIOR MONKS IN THE CITY TO TAKE OTHER ACTION.

7. AN ESTIMATED 200 STUDENTS, FARMERS AND OTHER PEOPLE RALLIED AT THE PRAMEN GROUNDS DECEMBER 2 TO PROTEST THE EXPULSION OF THE MONKS. MOST OF THE STUDENT LEADERS WERE FROM RAMKAMHENG UNIVERSITY. THE RALLY LASTED FOUR DAYS AND NOW SEEMS TO HAVE FIZZLED OUT EVEN THOUGH ITS ORGANIZERS HAD VOWED TO CONTINUE THEIR PROTEST UNTIL MAHA CHAT GETS A FAIR DEAL. RALLY SPEAKERS WERE HIGHLY CRITICAL OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL COUNCIL, AND EVEN CHARGED THAT SOME HIGH RANKING MONKS IN THE COUNCIL ARE EXPLOITING SOCIETY AND SPOILING BUDDHISM.

8. THE BANGKOK POST REPORTED DECEMBER 3
THAT GENERAL KRIT SIWARA HAS ADMITTED THAT THE GOVERNMENT COULD DO NOTHING TO AVERT THE RELIGIOUS CRISIS. HE SAID
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THAT A CRISIS COULD BE AVOIDED ONLY BY A GENERAL PUBLIC BOYCOTT OF THE MONKS INVOLVED IN THE FARMERS'S PROTEST. GENERAL PRACHUAP SUNTHARANGKUN OF THE THAI NATIONAL POLICE DEPARTMENT, SAID THAT THE TNPD WOULD NOT MEDDLE IN THE AFFAIRS OF THE CLERGY, BUT THAT HE WOULD PROVIDE GUARDS TO THE FIVE TOP MEMBERS OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL COUNCIL. THERE ARE REPORTS THAT RADICAL MONKS HAVE THREATENED TO ASSASSINATE THEM. SO FAR BOTH THE THAI AND ENGLISH PRESS HAVE COME OUT STRONGLY AGAINST THE OFFENDING MONKS.

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NSAE-00 RSC-01 SIL-01 AGR-05 SWF-01 CU-02 PA-01 PRS-01

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III. COMMENT.

9. WHATEVER THE IMMEDIATE OUTCOME OF THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE INVOLVEMENT OF BUDDHIST MONKS IN THE FARMERS RALLY, THE INCIDENT ITSELF IS A BENCHMARK IN THAI BUDDHIST HISTORY AND THE POLITICIZATION OF INTEREST GROUPS. IT SHOWS THAT THE WINDS OF DISCONTENT IN THAILAND HAVE EVEN WAFTED THROUGH THE TEMPLE DOORS, AND MAY HAVE STRUCK A RESPONSIVE CHIME AMONG YOUNGER MONKS WHO THEMSELVES ARE CHAFING UNDER A RIGID HIERARCHY WHERE UPWARD MOBILITY IS SO SLOW THAT THE TOP LEADERSHIP IS A DOTTERING GERITOCRACY. SEVERAL KNOWLEDGEABLE OBSERVERS HAVE THEORIZED THAT THE NUMEROUS STUDENT ACTIVISTS WHO HAVE ENTERED THE MONKHOOD FOR VARYING DURATIONS DURING THE PAST YEAR ARE ALMOST CERTAINLY THE VEHICLE WHICH CARRIED ACTIVIST POLITICS AND SOCIAL DISCONTENT INTO THE WATS.

10. THE FARMERS' RALLY WAS A NATURAL VENUE FOR THE YOUNG MONKS' MAIDEN INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC ISSUES AS THE MONKS HAVE AN INTIMATE UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRIALS FACING THE POOR OF THAILAND. THE POOR, AND ESPECIALLY THE RURAL AGRARIAN POOR, HAVE LONG TURNED MORE TO THE MONKS THAN TO THE GOVERNMENT FOR ASSISTANCE WITH THEIR DAY-TO-DAY PROBLEMS. AS EVEN RURAL LIFE HAS BECOME MORE COMPLEX AND TECHNICAL, THE CLERGY'S ABILITY TO MEET THE EDUCATIONAL AND ASSISTANCE REQUIREMENTS OF THEIR PARISHIONERS HAS
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BECOME LESS EFFECTIVE. HENCE THOSE MONKS WITH AN ACTIVE SOCIAL AWARENESS AND CONCERN ARE FRUSTRATED.

11. ONE OF THE KEY FACTORS IN DETERMINING THE OUTCOME OF THE CONTROVERSY WILL BE THE REACTION OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC. THE INITIAL REACTION IN BANGKOK APPEARS TO BE AGAINST THE ACTIVIST MONKS AND ANY ELEMENTS WHO WOULD DRAG THEM INTO POLITICS. MANY FARMERS, HOWEVER, MAY NOT INTERPRET WHAT THE MONKS HAVE DONE AS POLITICAL IN NATURE (AND THEREFORE VERBOTEN). THEY ARE USED TO GOING TO THE MONKS FOR HELP - OFTEN ASKING THEM TO AT AS INTERMEDIARIES BETWEEN THEM AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AT THE DISTRICT AND PROVINCIAL LEVELS. IN A SENSE, WHAT THE MONKS WERE DOING ON NOVEMBER 29 WAS AN EXTENSION OF THIS ROLE.

12. A SECOND MAJOR FACTOR THAT WILL AFFECT THE RESOLUTION OF THE CONTROVERSY IS THE ACTIONS THE EXPELLED OR THREATENED MONKS THEMSELVES TAKE. THEY ARE LIMITED IN NUMBER. THEIR CHALLENGE IS AS YET NOT DIRECTLY AIMED AT THE BUDDHIST HIERARCHICAL SYSTEM. THEY MAY WELL NOT HAVE INTENDED TO ACT POLITICALLY, NOR BELIEVED THAT THEY WERE DOING SO. MAHA CHAT, FOR EXAMPLE, CLAIMS THAT ALL HE WAS DOING WAS EXPRESSING HIS GRATITUDE TO FARMERS WHO GROW THE RICE THAT MONKS EAT. IN SO SAYING, MAHA CHAT WAS PARAPHRASING THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING TO HIS OWN FOLLOWERS NEVER TO FORGET THAT THE FOUR BASIC NECESSITIES OF THEIR LIVES -- FOOD, WATER, CLOTHING AND SHELTER -- CAME FROM THE PEOPLE. IF THE ACTIVIST MONKS DECIDE TO DRAW BACK AND THE BUDDHIST HIERARCHY PERMITS THEM TO DO SO GRACEFULLY, THE ISSUE CAN BE PAPERED OVER FOR THE TIME BEING. IF, HOWEVER, THE ACTIVIST MONKS SEEK PUBLIC SUPPORT TO PRESS THEIR CAUSE, THEY WILL CERTAINLY FIND SOME ELEMENTS WILLING TO PRIVIDE IT. THERE WILL THEN DEVELOP AN IMMEDIATE AND SERIOUS CONFRONTATION IN A SECTOR OF THAI SOCIETY HITHERTO UNAFFECTED BY PROTEST -- ONE THAT ALONG WITH THE KING HAS SERVED SO WELL AS A STABILIZING FORCE AND PARAMETER WITHIN WHICH OTHER SOCIAL-POLITICAL CONFLICTS COULD PLAY THEMSELVES OUT.

13. THE BASIC ISSUE IS THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BUDDHIST CLERGY AND ITS PARISHIONERS IN A SITUATION NEW TO

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THAILAND, OF SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL UPHEAVAL. THE FARMERS' RALLY CREATED AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ACTIVIST MONKS TO BRING THE ISSUE INTO THE OPEN FOR THE FIRST TIME. WE BELIEVE THE ISSUE IS IN THE OPEN TO STAY, THOUGH IT MAY BE PAPERED OVER TEMPORARILY. SOME OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT IF THE BUDDHIST ECCLESIASTICAL COUNCIL CHOOSES TO REJECT TODAY'S CHALLENGE AND REFUSES TO RESPOND, THAI BUDDHISM WILL CONGEAL

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AND BECOME INCREASINGLY IRRELEVANT IN THE NEW SOCIAL POLITICAL SITUATION. WHEREAS, IF IT CAN ADJUST - AND THE SECULAR THAI CONSERVATIVE ELITE WILL PERMIT IT TO DO SO - THEN THE BUDDHIST CHURCH WILL PERSERVE ITS VITAL ROLE IN THE LIVES OF THE THAI PEOPLE, AS HAS THE THAI MONARCHY. IN THE LATTER CASE, BUDDHISM WILL CONTINUE TO BE A FORCE FOR STABILITY.

14. IN THE INTERIM, KRIT SIWARA'S FEELING THAT "THIS IS THE END OF EVERYTHING" IS PERHAPS A SIGNAL - AN INDICATION OF JUST HOW SERIOUSLY THE CONSERVATIVE LEADERSHIP TAKES THE CURRENT SITUATION. FOR NOW THE PROTESTORS HAVE DISPERSED. WE DO NOT BELIEVE, HOWEVER, THAT WE HAVE SEEN THE LAST OF THE SAFFRON ROBES IN PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS. MASTERS

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